

Stabilising the Middle East

Stakeholders, Threats, Strategies

Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier

The Middle East, an energy hub and global strategic crossroads, is geopolitically valuable. In keeping with an infernal dialectic, Iran-Shiite imperialism and global jihadism have combined their destabilising efforts, threatening the region with all-out conflict. At times tempted by "reasonable accommodation", Western powers can no longer contemplate events from such a remote perspective. The Syrian-Iraqi theatre and the Arabian Gulf is on the brink of a major inter-state war. In Yemen, the upsurge of the Tehran-backed Houthis and the deep-rooted al-Qaeda presence looms over Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the shipping lanes between Europe and Asia. Here, as elsewhere, the West must pinpoint the enemy and support their regional allies.

As the North American oil industry expanded and the United States turned towards Asia-Pacific, for a short time, it was customary to think that the Middle East was a region in the process of accelerated marginalisation. Following the "Arab Spring" of 2011, an "Islamist Winter," which was more or less inspired by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, and then the war in Syria, the Middle East quickly took centre-stage once more. With the exception of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member countries, a substantial part of the region has since fallen into disarray, war and chaos. The Iranian regime has not failed to exploit this situation.

Having been introduced as a fanciful geopolitical scenario, the threat of a "Shia Crescent"– i.e., an Iranian-Shiite domination from the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean–, has now become reality. Against a backdrop of numerous political and economic blockades, the Sunni-style jihadism and the Shiite-style jihadism are combining their efforts to destabilise the Middle East, at the risk of widespread conflagration.

Obviously, the region retains its great geopolitical importance, which the West–more so Europeans than North Americans–, cannot ignore. The Middle East is home not

Figure 1. Map of the Middle East



only to the most abundant oil and gas reserves in the world, but also the simplest to extract. Even if the region's major producers no longer control the oil market, they remain at the centre of the world energy map. The Middle East is also a pivotal space between Europe and East Asia, which is highlighted by the maritime branch of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (the "new Silk Road"). We must also keep an eye on the situation in Yemen and not rule out the double threat posed by the Houthis, backed by Iran, and the al-Qaeda group, quick to exploit the chaos: one-third or more of world trade passes through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (southern Yemen). Lastly, the Middle East, which threatens to explode under the pressure of powerful strategic contradictions, is located in the

immediate vicinity of Europe. Therefore, how can we disengage? A panorama of the area shows the decisive importance, particularly in the Arabian Gulf, of regional alliances with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, powers that are rallying together against the Iran-Shiite regime.

The Middle East situation. A potential global disaster

The Syrian conflict and its international repercussions

Far from contributing to the advent of a more liberal and democratic Middle East, the shock wave of the "Arab Spring" (2011), its repercussions and counteractions, have devastated a large portion of the region since they happened. The situation in Syria is the clearest example. Bashar Al-Assad's determination to remain in power, with the active and direct support of Russia and Iran, is at the root of a long, unrelenting war, the ultimate consequences of which we are yet to fully grasp. To date, around 330,000 Syrians have died in this conflict and more than five million people have been forced to leave their homes. This means that almost a quarter of the total population has sought refuge in other parts of Syria, in neighbouring countries (mainly Turkey and Jordan), or in Europe. This demographic change is comparable to ethnic cleansing and reinforces the domination of the Alawite faction over the Sunni Arab majority in this composite country (1). At the start of the insurrection, Bashar al-Assad claimed: "It's either me, or chaos." In the end, Syria has suffered both while chaos threatens the entire region.

It would be a mistake to believe that the worst is behind us, with the consolidation of the Damascus regime, following the fall of the Duma and Yarmouk regions (April-May 2018), being a prerequisite for a return to peace and stability (2). On the one hand, the "political transition", promised by the Kremlin and called for in various UN Security Council resolutions, has not even been sketched out (3). The "Astana Process" led by the Moscow-Tehran-Ankara trio competes with the Geneva process, but without succeeding in establishing any form of "*Pax Putina*". Meanwhile, the Moscow-Damascus-Tehran axis, represented on the ground by the combined military intervention of autumn 2015, has led to further evils. The Russo-Shiite front that spans the Middle East from east to west, the roots of the *Pasdarans* and other pan-Shiite militias in Syria, and Iran's ambitions to project its power in the Mediterranean have broken the balance. The Iran-Shiite regime is a direct threat to Israel and the Sunni Arab regimes in the region. By all accounts, this form of warfare, that began between Iran and the Jewish state, is now a conflict that could spread beyond the Middle East.

(1) The Alawites are a branch of Shi'ism, representing 10% of the Syrian population. The Assad clan has monopolised the political scene since the Hafez Al-Assad coup in 1970, in the wake of the seizure of power by the Baathists. In addition to the Alawites, there is an almost equal proportion of Kurds and Christians as well as Druze, another minority attached to Shi'ism (6-7%). The rest of the population, little more than three-fifths, is made up of Sunni Arabs. With its composite population, in a way, Syria is an ethnic and religious compendium of the Middle East.

(2) North-eastern Syria, Afrine and the western territories of the Euphrates, Idlib to the northwest and the Deraa region to the south (just short of the Jordanian border) still escape the grip of Damascus. In total, the regime controls at least half of the territory, but it is the so-called "useful Syria" (Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis and Mediterranean coast) which represents two thirds of the population (without taking into account the demographic change).

(3) See, in particular, United Nations Resolution 2254 of 18 December 2015, which contemplated "credible, inclusive and non-confessional governance" for Syria. The so-called "Astana Process" was then implemented by Russia, Turkey and Iran in early 2017 after the fall of Aleppo on 22 December 2016. Officially, this negotiating format aims at achieving cease-fires and setting up de-escalation zones. In fact, it serves to circumvent the negotiations conducted in Geneva, within the United Nations framework.

The uncertain future of Iraq and Lebanon

First, we must examine the regional situation from the perspective of what geographers call the "Syrian isthmus", a geopolitical space located between the Arab-Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the "Shiite axis", with Bashar al-Assad's Syria as its backbone, starts in Iran, crosses Iraq and extends as far as Lebanon. As for Iraq, it is a weakly-constituted state created at the time of the British mandate (1920-1932) and, evidently, America's attempt at political engineering that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (2003) has not paid off. Throughout 2007 and 2008, General Petraeus was able to regain control of a situation that was spiralling into a "war of everybody against everybody", but the American withdrawal then left all scope for action in the hands of the Iran-Shiite regime (2011). The anti-Sunni policies of Nouri Al-Maliki, Prime Minister of Iraq and an ally of Tehran ⁽¹⁾, are partly to blame for the rise of the "Islamic State" phenomenon. On 12 May 2018, Moqtada Al-Sadr's general election victory, representing a sort of peoples' Shiite Islamism, in alliance with the Iraqi Communists, shows no signs of stabilising the situation. On the contrary, the unpredictability of the political situation still favours Tehran's intervention.

Lebanon is another fragile state, at the mercy of the balancing acts of its religious and denominational factions. The involvement of Bashar al-Assad and the Iran-Shiite regime, which arms and supports Hezbollah, are aggravating the risk of destabilisation ⁽²⁾. The parliamentary elections of 6 May 2018, the first polls since 2009, confirmed the increasing demographic and political weight of the Shiite population at electoral level. The majority of Shiites voted for Hezbollah, which is both a political party and a heavily armed militia that controls southern Lebanon, intervenes militarily in Syria as a support force to the *Pasdarans* and has taken up new positions on Israel's northern border. It was both telling and shocking to see Hezbollah militants celebrate their victory at the foot of Rafic Hariri's statue, the former Prime Minister assassinated on 14 February 2005. The reappointment of his son, Saad Hariri, as head of the government can be explained by the country's constitutional mechanisms. A political truth has to be faced: the containment of the Iran-Shiite push in Lebanon has failed and the country's destiny is directly and indirectly controlled by Hezbollah, to the benefit of the Iran-Shiite regime. The "Shiite Crescent" has become geopolitical reality.

At the periphery of the Middle East

North of the region, Turkey has a grandstand seat overlooking the Middle East. Initially engaged in Syria towards overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime, Recep T. Erdogan shifted his policies in the summer of 2016, after the coup attempt in July. While Turkey's foreign policy is willingly described as neo-Ottoman; its prevailing focus is on combatting Kurdish irredentism, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and the FDS (Syrian Democratic Forces). The PYD and FDS are linked to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). Since the summer of 2016, a surprising Turkish-Russian rapprochement dissipated the strong tensions felt in the preceding months, after a Russian aircraft had been shot

⁽¹⁾ A member of the Shiite Dawa party, Nouri Al-Maliki headed the Iraqi government between 2006 and 2014. He then became Vice President of the Republic.

⁽²⁾ The Lebanese branch of *Pasdaran*, Hezbollah was founded in 1982. Since 1992, the leader is Hassan Nasrallah. This party-militia controls the southern part of Lebanon and the Shiite neighbourhoods of Beirut as well as the Lebanese political scene. The war in Syria has allowed its troops gain force and take up positions near the plateau of the Golan Heights, threatening to open a new front against Israel.

down in Turkish airspace (24 November 2015). Hence, Turkey became a stakeholder in the "Astana Process". That said, the situation in Syria and its developments are fraught with threats for Turkey. Even more so when Ankara's tactical games, between the United States and Russia, could weaken its western alliances (Turkey is a member of NATO), making the country more vulnerable both to Russian manipulation and to Irani-Shiite regional ambitions. The Islamic nationalism of the AKP and the future of Turkey pose major uncertainties (1).

To the west, Egypt is a peripheral yet essential player in regional geopolitics. Located at the intersection of the African and Middle Eastern "arc of crisis", Egypt is the region's most populated nation, standing at the heart of the Arab world, between Maghreb and Mashriq. Egypt is engaged both in Nile region of Africa and in the Red Sea, as the opening to the Suez Canal. It is worth recalling Egypt's participation in the Arab coalition, led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, engaged in a fierce battle in Yemen, both against Houthi rebels, supported by the Iran-Shiite regime, and the two branches of global jihadism, i.e., al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. It goes without saying that the Yemeni war is of primary concern to Europe, given that some of the terrorist attacks carried out on its soil were masterminded from jihadist-controlled areas (see below). This same terrorist actions affect Egypt, specifically in the Sinai region. Hence Cairo is also particularly wary of the evolution of the situation in Libya. Along with the United Arab Emirates, Marshal Al-Sissi, President of Egypt, supports Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the Master of Cyrenaica, engaged in difficult negotiations with Fayeze Al-Sarraj and the government based in Tripolitania (2). The fact remains that Nasser's ambitions have lived on: Egypt does not seem capable of assuming any meaningful leadership in the Arab-Muslim world.

Regional destabilisation. Stakeholders and factors

Iranian-Shiite expansionism

It is impossible to summarise the situation in single factor and in a one-dimensional way, without considering the historical past, the reality of Iranian-Shiite expansionism, the damage already caused and the threats it represents, *hic et nunc*, as essential elements of a geopolitical analysis. First, it is important to put the facts into perspective. A bizarre combination of pan-Islamism and leftist Third-Worldism in its beginnings, the Shi'ite Islamic Revolution of February 1979 and the rise to power of Imam Khomeini are at the origin of a major upheaval in the Middle East and the world, fuelled by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan at the end of the same year (December 1979). Since then, an Islamist wave has swept across the Middle East, with Shiite and Sunni Jihadism mutually nourishing each other. Although the Gulf War (1980-1988) exhausted the pan-Islamic and Third-Worldism approach of Khomeinism, a new Iran-Shiite synthesis, rooted in Persian nationalism, has now taken

(1) The presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 24 June 2018 will give an idea of Recep T. Erdogan's degree of control in Turkey. Following the crackdown after the failed coup in July 2016, Turkey is becoming an autocracy and the political polarisation generated by Erdogan comprises his future.

(2) On 17 December 2015, an inter-Libyan agreement was signed in Skhirat (Morocco), under the auspices of the UN. On the basis of this agreement, a government of national unity, led by Fayeze Sarraj, was founded and instated in Tripoli. To the east, in Cyrenaica, there is a parallel government formed by General Haftar (now a self-appointed Marshal) and the Libyan Parliament, which has retreated to Tobruk.

over (1). Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the Pasdarans are spurred on by a vast project to dominate the Middle East, from the Caspian and Persian Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean, with possible repercussions in North Africa and the western basin of the ancient *Mare Nostrum* (2).

Tehran's expansionism and the opening of a "Shiite highway" across the Middle East to Israel is already a recognised threat, but the Sunni Arab regimes are equally jeopardised. The *Pasdarans* boast that they already control four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. While we have already mentioned Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the situation in Yemen is often only approached from the humanitarian angle. Indeed, the weight of the past (the Marxist regime of South Yemen), the support given to Saddam Hussein during the invasion of Kuwait (1990) and the late unification of a country that is split geographically and tribally (1991) only partially explain its geopolitical situation. Yet it is Tehran's support for the Houthi rebellion, the Zaydi minority in the north-west, which has given the civil war a new dimension (3). In 2014, the capture of Sanaa and the exile of the legal government led to the intervention of an Arab coalition led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (March 2015). In breach of the UN arms embargo, the delivery of Iranian ballistic missiles to the rebels and their use against Saudi Arabia could lead this conflict to spread (4). The Houthi are therefore aiding and abetting the Iran-Shiite regime in its regional domination ambitions, outflanking the Gulf monarchies. This geopolitical issue also has a strong international dimension: the main shipping route between Europe and Asia passes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, a bottleneck in world trade (5).

(1) However, the Iranian leaders are able to exploit pan-Islamism and, if need be, they find points of consensus with Sunni-affiliated Islamist forces and movements. This was the case both in Afghanistan and Iraq, in order to lead a proxy battle against the Americans and their NATO allies (Bashar al-Assad's Syria was then a hub for Islamists fighting in Iraq). Tehran also provides support for Hamas, masters of the Gaza Strip.

(2) In the issue of *Jeune Afrique* dated 14 May 2018, Nasser Bourita, the Moroccan Foreign Affairs Minister, accuses Tehran of supplying weapons to the Polisario Front via Hezbollah and with the complicity of Algeria. As a result, Rabat announced it was cutting-off diplomatic relations with Iran. Tehran, Hezbollah and Algiers all deny any arms deliveries to the Polisario Front. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have officially given Morocco their backing. At the very least, this case shows the reality of a geopolitical alignment of States opposed to Iranian-Shiite expansionism, from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf; a major development that European states will not be able to keep at bay for long. Nasser Bourita, "Notre diplomatie est globale, autonome et responsable" *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2018.

(3) Zaidism is a branch of Shiism, which is related to yet distinct from Twelver Shiism and Ismailism. It was formed in the 8th century, in opposition to the Sunnism of the Umayyads dynasty that, out of Damascus, dominated the Arab-Muslim world. Nine-tenths of Shiites are Twelvers (they believe in twelve Imams, successors to the Prophet, the last of whom will return on the Day of Judgment) and make up the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Azerbaijan and Lebanon. Ismailis are divided into several families, including the Druze, present in Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

(4) The international expert analysis of the remains of two missiles, fired on 22 July and 4 November 2017, confirmed that they were Qiam-1-type Iranian missiles. This information appears in a UN report, submitted to the Security Council in January 2018. The same report confirms that Iran has breached the arms embargo imposed on Yemen, contemplated in resolution 2216 (April 2016).

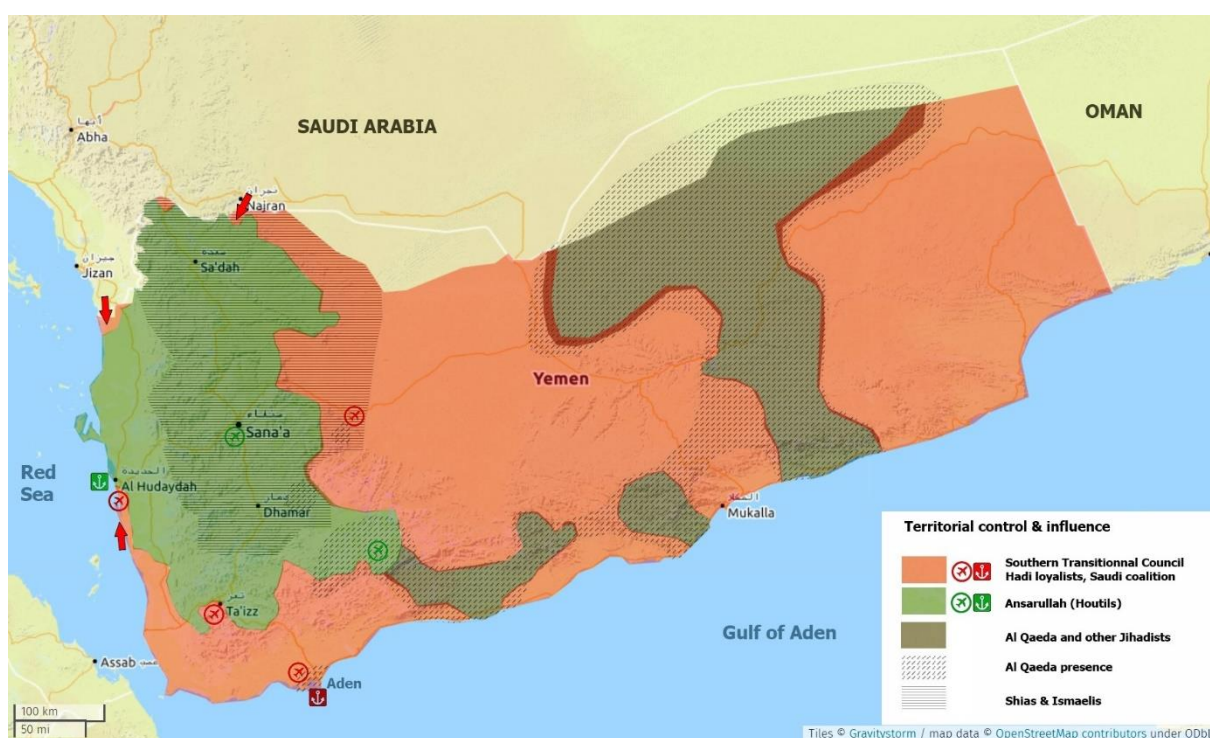
(5) Between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (the "Door of Tears") connects the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Gulf of Aden. The British settled in Aden in 1839, the French in Djibouti in 1862. With the opening of the Suez Canal, inaugurated in 1869, this strait became crucially significant. Aden then became one of the main ports in the world.

Sunni-style global jihadism

In the Yemen war, the United Arab Emirates' strong commitment of ground forces within the Sunni-Arab coalition and battle with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA), the Yemeni branch of the nebulous terrorist organisation founded by Osama Bin Laden, also highlights the persistence of Sunni-style global jihadism. It is important to recall that al-Qaeda's founder was of Yemeni descent and that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this country incubated the organisation. Al-Qaeda appeared on the global scene after the suicide attack against the USS Cole on 12 October 2000, in the port of Aden ⁽¹⁾.

Western intelligence services consider the AQPA, founded in 2009, one of the most vigorous branches of this international Islamic terrorist group. On this other front against terror, from the south of the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa, the United States and its allies have been waging war for several years with surgical precision, using drones and special forces. The deadly activism of AQPA has extensions reaching far beyond its bases: the Kouachi brothers, responsible for the January 2015 attack against the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists in France, claimed to be from this organisation. In the present context, AQPA is rooted in "grey areas" in Yemen where the United Arab Emirates special forces are leading the battle on the ground.

Figure 2. Territorial Control and Influence in Yemen, June 2018



Source. *The Maghreb and Orient Courier*

⁽¹⁾ The USS Cole is a US Navy guided missile destroyer. This suicide bombing killed 17 American sailors and injured 39 others.

The war in Yemen and its different dimensions

The war in Yemen spans various timelines: the long English sovereignty over Aden and the geographical, tribal and denominational divide between North and South; the establishment of a Marxist regime in South Yemen (1967-1990) and the late arrival of unification (1990); the confiscation of power by Ali Abdallah Saleh (1978-2012) and the triggering of a civil war by the Zaydis, also called "Houthis" (2002); the 2011 revolution and the departure of Saleh, used by the Houthis who, with the help of Tehran, took Sanaa and prompted President Hadi to flee (September 2014). At Hadi's request, an Arab coalition led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi intervened (26 March 2015), with the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 providing international legal backing (14 April

2015). Justifiably, NGOs have stressed the dramatic consequences of the war. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates provide humanitarian aid, the geostrategic challenges of this conflict are also very complex: a proxy war with Iran, freedom of navigation in the Bal el-Mandeb strait and the fight against al-Qaeda. Finally, there are multiple warring factions and the modus operandi, even within the coalition, is not always the same. While Riyadh favours air raids on the north of the country, the Emirati forces operate on the ground, engaging selectively. They are waging a war against al-Qaeda and, to do so, give backing to groups seeking greater autonomy of the South.

At regional level, the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, the "capitals" of the Islamic State, does not necessarily imply that this jihadism only exists in residual form. In Syria, the Turkish intervention in Afrine, the military foothold of the Iran-Shiite regime and its repercussions, namely, the dangerous transformation of the war into a vast inter-state conflict, offer new opportunities for Islamic State as well as for al Qaeda. In Iraq, a possible anti-Sunni policy, led by Shiite extremists with the support of Tehran, would have effects similar to what took place under Al-Maliki's government (2006-2014), once free from American supervision. From North Africa to Upper Asia, in the Af-Pak theatre (Afghanistan-Pakistan), jihadism is not weakening and has deep-rooted theological and cultural origins as well as socio-political and economic goals.

In this respect, the situation in Syria is a melting pot and catalyst of the regional situation: with different types of conflicts accumulating rather than succeeding one another, and jihadism forming a structural element of the geopolitical landscape. Faced with this situation, the solidarity of the Sunni Arab regimes, allied with the West, should prevail, but the "perverse games" of recent years have not completely vanished. Hence the ransoms paid by Qatar to various Islamist groups, that were considered to be disguised subsidies by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In addition to the special relations maintained between Doha and Tehran, these ambiguities explain the serious crisis affecting the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The timid progress in the fight against terrorist financing, highlighted by Doha, is a reflection of past compromises ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Since 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have maintained a blockade against Qatar, reproaching the emirate of its ties with Tehran and a number of ambiguities concerning Islamist groups. Following the international conference on the financing of terrorism held in Paris held on 25 and 26 April 2018, Qatar published a list of individuals and organisations that will now be subject to sanctions; a list that partly overlaps with the list that Emirians and Saudis published at the beginning of the blockade.

The grievances against Qatar

Since 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain imposed a blockade on Qatar which, albeit partial, forced the emirate to reorganise its trade channels and dip into its ample foreign exchange reserves. In Doha, there is criticism of a break in the Sunni front against Iran, multifaceted support for various terrorist movements, including through the Al-Jazeera chain that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are calling to be shut down, as well as the opening of a Turkish military base on Qatari soil. Recently, the possible purchase of a Russian anti-aircraft and anti-missile system (S-400) led Saudi Arabia to threaten Doha with pre-emptive military action. Among this list of grievances, the indirect financing of terrorist groups, such as the Syrian and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda, is reflected in a number of public sources, including various

investigations by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Cited by Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, these investigations reveal that huge ransoms paid by Qatar have lined the coffers of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (1). The settlement of these vast sums were apparently not just aimed at recovering Western hostages or to accommodate their governments, but instead, paid with idea of buying an insurance policy, or even seeking the support of these groups in regional conflicts. Furthermore, these investigations also indicted the governments of the countries the hostages came from, given that international bodies prohibit ransom payments. The fact remains that Qatar's blockade signals the decline of the Gulf Cooperation Council, victim of its own geopolitical contradictions.

In the background: Islam in crisis

The infernal dialectic between Shia jihadism and Sunni jihadism is taking place amid the profound crisis of Islam, where the emphasis is placed less on religion and more on the civilisation model that the word "Islam" evokes. The Arab-Muslim world lived its golden era, but it was first overshadowed by the expansion of the West, then the renewed emergence of Asia. We refer here to the theses of the great orientalist Bernard Lewis, who recently passed away (2). The historic impasse in which large parts of the Middle East find themselves is a reflection of Arab, Third World and secularist nationalism, which succeeded Western rule in the post-war period (3). Under the leadership of *rais* at the head of hypertrophied states, Arab peoples were destined to unite, destroy Israel and access modernity through state interventionism. In reality, the "Arab model" has failed, both on the battlefields and in the field of development. Within the various Arab states, the ruling clans confiscated wealth and wiped out free enterprise; on the outside, the Six Day War (1967) marked the failure of "Arab socialism". Since then, state nationalism and Islamism have prevailed over pan-Arabism. Meanwhile, the agile economies of the Far East, often devoid of natural resources, have outperformed those in the Middle East, further wounding the pride of the region's peoples. In many ways, this part of the world has simply "stalled".

(1) Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, *Nos très chers émirs*, Michel Lafon, 2016, pp. 122-126.

(2) Cf. Bernard Lewis, *L'Islam en crise*, Le Débat-Gallimard, 2003. The wake-up-call for the ruling classes of the Middle East, inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, dates from the Egyptian Expedition, led in 1798 by Napoleon Bonaparte. Since then, the ruling classes have sought to import instrumental modernity, as a source of power, while banishing axiological modernity (Western values).

(3) More often than not, it was not colonisation in the strict sense of the term, but protectorates and mandates of the League of Nations.

From the 1980s, the region's economies began to open up to the private sector and to foreign investment, in line with IMF recommendations. This openness was selective and restricted, under the control of ruling clans that took over entire sectors of the economy. Corruption reigned, property rights were very uncertain and the market economy acted as a mere facade. During the 2000s, growth accelerated in MENA (Middle East-North Africa), but it was not enough to absorb the "numerous classes" born in a period of population growth (the Arab world is barely emerging from this demographic transition). Under 25s represent half the population, the job market is overcrowded and prospects for young people are non-existent. Furthermore, this meagre growth is highly dependent on the global economy. The financial crisis of 2008 led to rising food prices, in countries where water and arable land are scarce, and signalled the origin of the 2011 uprisings. In terms of political and economic liberalisation, the "Arab Spring" only served to precede an "Islamist Winter", imposed by the reaffirmation of authoritarian powers. With the exception of a few Gulf countries that escaped the "commodities curse" - like the United Arab Emirates that diversified the economy and deployed efforts to avoid the transformation of Islamic religion into a deadly ideology -, the factors blocking the situation are still relevant. The absence of modernisation and growth aggravates the cultural contradictions of the region's countries, like a "black hole" threatening the whole world.

Points of support and elements of a great Western strategy

A struggle on two geopolitical fronts

The difficulty and the challenge for Western powers consists of maintaining internal unity, while leading the fight on two geopolitical fronts: on the one hand, Iran-Shiite expansionism, which threatens the entire neighbouring region of Europe, especially the Mediterranean; on the other hand, global jihadism, which seeks to overthrow Sunni Arab regimes deemed ungodly and strikes deep in the territorial heart of western societies. As things stand, the most difficult task, after the United States pulled out of the Iranian nuclear agreement of 14 July 2015, will be once again to develop a common position on the Iran-Shiite regime and its practices (1). On the European side, it must be accepted, without a showdown, that it will not be possible to bring Tehran to negotiate the post-2025 situation, when some of the *sunset clauses* will be obsolete, limiting its ballistic missiles programme and preventing it from extending its dominance in the Middle East (2). When French diplomacy mentioned these points of the Iranian question, the regime's leaders flatly refused to consider them. From the outset, these demands were doomed to lead to a new diplomatic crisis. On

(1) Cf. Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, *L'accord nucléaire iranien, la stratégie américaine et les illusions européennes*, Institut Thomas More, May 2018.

(2) *Sunset clauses* are restrictive clauses contained in the JCPOA (*Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*), which specifically concern the number of centrifuges, advanced research in the nuclear field (2025) or the level of enrichment of uranium (2030). Added to this, is the ballistic missiles programme with a 2,000 km range (the Shahab, Ghadr and Khorramchahr missiles), capable of carrying several warheads in the case of Khorramchahr. Already, these missiles posed a threat to the entire Middle East, Western compounds in the region as well as the south-eastern fringes of Europe and southern Russia. According to some analyses, these missiles' range could easily be extended up to 5,000 km. In this case, the whole of Europe and the "extended Mediterranean" would be within striking range.

the American side, the declared intention to put pressure on Tehran should be seen as part of a broader strategy in the Middle East. The US will be unable to achieve its goals if it suggests that its ultimate intention is to disengage from the region. Moreover, it is unclear how a realistic geopolitical alignment between Israel and the Sunni Arab regimes could occur and be sustainable without the oversight of the American *hegemon*.

At the same time, the fight against global Sunni jihadism will require the continuity of the Arab-Western coalition formed in the summer of 2014, in response to the rise of Islamic State. The firmest sign of this pact is the deployment of Western special forces (United States, France, United Kingdom) to the Arab-Kurdish units that make up the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) in North-East Syria as well as in Manbij, west of the Euphrates. Although this last case is the subject of negotiations with Ankara (see below), maintaining these Western forces is crucial, both for fighting against the offshoots of the Islamic State –more vigorous than the fall of Mosul and Raqqa might suggest–⁽¹⁾, and also to counter the presence of *Pasdarans*, Hezbollah and other pan-Shiite militias on the Syrian stage. It is unlikely that mere economic and financial sanctions against Tehran will be enough to cut the Iran-Shiite "land bridge" across Syria. In both objectives, the political and military cooperation of neighbouring countries will be vital. This raises the question of the Iraq's direction and the approach of its incumbent government following the parliamentary elections (12 May 2018). Another country we seldom mention as an important ally is Jordan, which hosts the rear support base for the forces deployed at Deraa, in southern Syria. Finally, we must consider the importance of the financial aspect of the fight against terrorism because it requires the full cooperation of the region's countries ⁽²⁾.

The United Arab Emirates, the main "gateway" to the Arabian-Persian Gulf

Americans and Europeans must take into consideration the security interests of their numerous allies or privileged partners in the Middle East. As an unrivalled regional military power with a dynamic economy, Israel is apparently in a position of strength, but it has become a besieged stronghold. It is directly confronted with the Iran-Shiite threat, presented for too long in our countries as over-exaggerated (a fantasy, even). From the Western point of view, Israel is more of an advanced outpost than a gateway to the region. Jordan is a key state, in a military role, but whose future partially rests on the support of its Western allies and the Arab-Persian Gulf states. In many ways, the repression of Iran's ambitions as well as the fight against Islamic terrorism depend on those states, lying on the front line in all respects. The subversion of these traditional monarchies would upset both regional and global balances. Formed in 1981, in response to the mounting threats from the Islamic Shiite revolution to free navigation in the Strait of Hormuz ⁽³⁾, the GCC is an ad-hoc club that brings

⁽¹⁾ On 8 June 2018, Islamic State regained part of the city of al-Boukamal, located in the province of Deir Ezzor, near the Iraqi border. This town had returned under the control of the Damascus regime in November 2017. Since the loss of Mosul and Raqqa, this is the first major operation by the terrorist organisation. After spreading across half of Syria, Islamic State control little more than 3%, but it still has real combat capabilities.

⁽²⁾ Cf. Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, "*Financement du terrorisme: que faut-il attendre du sommet 'No money for terror' de Paris ?*", *Challenges*, 25 April 2018.

⁽³⁾ Located between the port region of Banda Abbas (Iran) and Cape Musandam (Sultanate of Oman), the Strait of Hormuz connects the Arabian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Operated under a free transit regime, the Strait of Hormuz is patrolled by Iran and the Sultanate of Oman. 40 km wide and 65 km long, this geostrategic route sees close to one third of the world's oil production pass through. Since the Islamic Revolution, the United States has considered that the free circulation of shipping in this strait is a matter of vital interest (see the Carter doctrine,

together the Sunni Arab regimes of the Arabian Gulf. As an instrument of geopolitical cohesion, the GCC's mission was to contribute to sharing the burden of defending this geostrategic zone. The troubling games played by Qatar and the resulting blockade in place since 5 June 2017, reveal the underlying inconsistency of the GCC. If an "Arab NATO" were to emerge, it would have to be established on firmer ground and, in practice, the member-countries of this club of oil monarchies display contrasting approaches.

In addition to Qatar, Kuwait and Oman maintain certain links with Iran (1). By contrast, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have expressed their willingness to counter Iranian-Shiite imperialism. Due to its territorial size, demographic weight, oil reserves and its role in OPEC, Saudi Arabia has become a focus of attention, especially since Mohammed Ben Salman, inspired by the achievements of the United Arab Emirates, announced a major modernisation program. While it is important for the Saudi "quasi-caliphate" and centre of Wahhabism, to somehow undo what it has done, the country's inertia and the risks inherent in this transformation are still significant. Conversely, the policy implemented by the United Arab Emirates, the diversification of the Emirati economy (departing from the "all-oil" approach), and the commitment to the dual front of combatting terrorism and the Iran-Shiite threat are not always appreciated for their true value. The war being waged in Yemen deserves greater attention. We must not underestimate the geopolitical game being played in this country, behind the lines of the Sunni monarchies and close to the shipping routes between Europe and Asia. Anticipating an open conflict with Iran, the United Arab Emirates is projecting its power beyond the Arabian Gulf to loosen Tehran's grip on the Gulf of Aden and the Hormuz Strait. In short, Mohammed Ben Zayed has developed a comprehensive strategic vision and the United Arab Emirates is a fulcrum to ward off Iran's actions and threats.

Two important countries: Egypt and Turkey

Absorbed by its internal problems, the Egypt of Marshal Al-Sissi, re-elected president in March 2018, may seem to have taken a back seat on the question of Iran and Tehran's involvement in Yemen (2). Although Egypt contributes to the Arab coalition engaged in this theatre, its participation is limited to naval assistance. Unlike the United Arab Emirates, whose special forces are deployed on the ground, Cairo has refused to disembark its troops. However, we must look back to the high expectations caused in Iran by the swearing-in of President Mohammed Morsi in June 2012. From Tehran, the Egyptian revolution was seen as a replica of Iran's Islamic revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood was apparently favourable to the restoration of the diplomatic ties severed in 1980 (following the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty the year before). Indeed, Mohammed Morsi announced he was in favour of such an initiative, in order to shift the regional strategic balance, and planned on

1979). The establishment of the Rapid Deployment Task Force, in application of the Carter doctrine, was the precursor to the creation CENTCOM (the large US military command in charge of the Middle East and Central Asia). In case of escalation of the nuclear crisis, Tehran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz. Already, *Pasdaran* vessels have been deployed to provoke American ships crossing the Persian Gulf.

(1) The Sultanate of Oman is the easternmost state in the Arab world and most maritime. While part of its territory (the peninsula of Rus al Jebel) dominates the Straits of Hormuz, it also looks towards the Indian Ocean, East Africa and South and South-East Asia. The majority of Omanis practice Ibadism, stemming from the Khawarij movement and a rigorous branch of Islam distinct from Sunnism and Shiism. The Sultanate of Oman is considered an ally of the West, but it also cooperates closely with Iran. This sultanate favours a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis and, in the years preceding the agreement of 14 July 2015, it hosted discreet negotiations between the United States and Iran.

(2) Elected for the first time on 28 May 2014, with 96.9% of the vote, Abdel Fatah Al-Sissi was re-elected president after a poll held on 26-28 March 2018. Although he won with 97.08% of the votes, without real electoral competition, the turnout was low (41.05%).

rewriting the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. The year before, the Iranian navy had taken advantage of the chaotic situation in Egypt and tested the Egyptian military by sending two warships through the Suez Canal and across to the Syrian coast. In July 2013, Marshal Al-Sissi's coup and the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood interrupted a rapprochement that would have reinforced the Hezbollah-Hamas axis directed against Israel. The anti-terrorist campaign in Sinai is also crucially decisive: the transformation of this area into a terrorist base would not only endanger Egypt and Israel, but also Jordan and Saudi Arabia. And as mentioned above, Egypt is also contributing to the fight against terrorism on African soil. Finally, we must not forget that this country is the guardian of the Suez Canal and the SuMed oil pipeline that spans its territory (1).

Turkey is an important ally on the northern confines of the Middle East, notwithstanding the deteriorated state of its relations with the West, both the United States and the European Union and most of its members. Without lingering on this country's persistent role on the southern flank of Russia (despite tactical convergences in Syria and the purchase of S-400 missiles), we must also recall its agreements with the European Union that help cushion the migratory shock and moreover the upcoming inauguration of the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), a natural gas route from the Caspian Sea that will help diversify Europe's energy supply. At present, it is important to understand the geopolitical value of Turkey from the viewpoint of the Middle East and Iran-Shiite ambitions. While Turkish regional politics are dominated with Kurdish irredentism, with Neo-Ottomanism partly fuelling the rhetoric, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is determined to affirm his country's presence in the Middle East (2). Turkey's regional ambitions persist, having opened a base in Qatar that represents a point of friction with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, close ties with Sudan, also engaged in the Arab coalition leading the war in Yemen, could result in a military presence in the Red Sea. All this merits our close attention. In the longer term, Turkey is a potential buffer state against Iran-Shiite ambitions. In the immediate future, the Turkish foothold in north-west Syria objectively contributes to limiting the scope of action of the Moscow-Damascus-Tehran axis. This is where the follow-up to the Turkish-American Manjib negotiations will be decisive (3).

(1) 195 kilometres long, the Suez Canal connects the eastern Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and, via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, to the Indian Ocean. It represents an essential leg of the main route between Europe and Asia (old route to India), of high geostrategic importance. The new Suez Canal was officially opened on 6 August 2015. Completed in late July, the works have allowed traffic to double along 72 of its 195 km, by widening of the historic canal over 37 km and digging a new 35-kilometer-long lane. The doubling of lanes reduces the passage times in one direction from twenty to eleven hours, and from eight to three hours in the other direction. It will allow the passage of 97 ships per day by 2023 (49 ships before the works). The SuMed pipeline (Suez-Mediterranean) bypasses the Suez Canal, which was not designed to allow the passage of supertankers.

(2) The Neo-Ottoman project of Ahmet Davutoglu, a former diplomatic adviser and later Erdogan's foreign minister, consisted mainly of playing between the gaps in the regional *status quo*, developing Turkey's trade and influence. In the wake of the shock of the "Arab Spring", surprising Turkish leaders and their Western partners, Ankara thought it could "ride the tiger" and become a regional *hegemon*. We are now far removed from the fanciful vision of a Turkey taking advantage of 2011's seditions and insurrections, to spearhead of an ensemble Arab governments whose ideology would be inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. The neo-Ottoman discourse can be analysed as a mask of the Islamic nationalism embodied by Erdogan.

(3) Located west of the Euphrates River, the city of Manbij is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by US, French and British special forces. Ankara views the SDF as the sock-puppet of the PKK, calling for their withdrawal beyond the Euphrates in the north-eastern part of Syria. While the Turkish army was conducting an offensive on Afrin, Erdogan threatened to continue the operation as far as Manbij. A Turkish-American task force worked for several weeks on the issue. The meeting of 4 June 2018, between Mike Pompeo and Mevlut Cavusoglu, Foreign Ministers of both countries, apparently resulted in a roadmap: the FDS would withdraw from Manbij which remains under the political control of an Arab-majority military council, but supervised by Syrian Kurds. Manbij could become the keystone of northern Syria, seeking to escape the grip of Damascus and of Iranian-Shiite expansionism.

Conclusion. The Middle East, the "Gordian Knot" of the world

In conclusion, despite the rhetoric on the demise of the oil economy or the need to shelter behind illusory parapets, the high geopolitical value of the Middle East cannot be ignored. A global energy reservoir, the area also represents a geostrategic crossroads between Europe on the one hand, and South and East Asia on the other. Ever-present in studies on upheavals in global balances, the "Indo-Pacific" concept stresses the importance of the trade routes through the Indonesian straits, connecting the Arab-Persian Gulf to the Far East. Iran's ambition to dominate the Middle East, in itself a threat and the source of growing Sunni jihadism, should not leave Western powers indifferent. The practically unconditional support given to Bashar al-Assad by the Iran-Shiite regime, allied to Russia, and the merciless war endlessly waged in Syria have already had serious repercussions in the Mediterranean and in Europe. Overwhelming borders, the massive flows of refugees have fuelled electoral revolts that are upsetting European political systems. In the same vein, it would be misguided to view the Yemen conflict as a distant exotic war. Looking back at the long history of the port of Aden suffices for us to grasp the significance of the Bab el Mandeb Strait and the Suez route in world geopolitics. Hence, it is crucial to identify the West's allies in this context, especially in the Arabian Gulf, and to take their security interests into consideration.

Beyond these strategic, energetic and geo-economic considerations, we should ultimately examine the role the Middle East has played in our history, our geopolitical perceptions, and even in our collective unconscious. The great historian Pierre Chaunu viewed this area –between Asia Minor, the plateaus of Iran, the deserts of Arabia and the Nile Delta–, as the "hub of all human adventures". It was in these 800,000 square kilometres, the cradle of Neolithic agricultural techniques, that the Fertile Crescent took shape. During the vast protohistoric movements of peoples (Indo-Europeans, Semites and others), the Middle East already represented a strategic crossroads. From this geographical hub, the ancient space extended west and the northwards, until it covered a geographical area comprising of the Roman and Parthian empires and as far as the Germanic fringe in contact with the Mediterranean world; a total of about five million square kilometres that represented the entire known world before the Renaissance and the Great Discoveries ⁽¹⁾. All these movements were reflected in the fields of ideas, religion and metaphysics. In short, the attraction exercised by this region of the world, even today, is not just mere expression of outmoded orientalism: the Middle East is the Gordian Knot of the world.

⁽¹⁾ Cf. Pierre Chaunu, *Histoire et décadence*, Perrin, 1981, particularly Chapter, "La décadence objective" (pp. 142-164) and Chapter VII "La décadence référente – Les anciens empires" (pp. 165-198).

Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER, a French national, holds a degree in history and geography, a master's degree in political science and a DEA in geography and geopolitics. Doctor in geopolitics, he is Associate Professor of History-Geography and researcher at the Institut Français de Géopolitique (Université Paris VIII Vincennes-Saint-Denis). He is a speaker at the IHEDN (Institut des Hautes Études de la Défense Nationales, Paris), of which he is a former auditor and where he received the 2007 Scientific Prize for his thesis on «The geopolitical stakes of the French European defence project». Reserve officer in the French Navy, he is attached to the Centre d'études stratégiques de la Marine (CESM) at the École Militaire. He is the author of several books, including *La France, l'Europe, l'OTAN : une approche géopolitique de l'atlantisme français* (Paris, Unicomm, 2006), *La Russie menace-t-elle l'Occident?* (Paris, Choiseul, 2009) and *Géopolitique de la Russie* (with Françoise Thom, Paris, PUF, 2018). He regularly contributes to the *Hérodote* journal.

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Paris

8, rue Monsigny – F-75 002 Paris
+33 (0)1 49 49 03 30

Bruxelles

Avenue Walkiers, 45, B-1160 Bruxelles
+32 (0)2 374 23 13

www.institut-thomas-more.org
info@institut-thomas-more.org

